

[Joel Banner Baird, Burlington Free Press](#)

Vermont students and farmers would benefit from proposed legislation designed to bring more locally produced fruits and vegetables to schools, Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., announced Monday morning at Malletts Bay School in Colchester.

If the bill passes, Vermont schools would be well-positioned to replace current federal fresh-food aid (bulk, surplus produce such as carrots, potatoes and apples trucked from Rhode Island) with purchases of up to \$90,000 from nearby farms, Welch said.

Food costing that much annually reaches Vermont school cafeterias through the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, a collaboration with the Department of Agriculture that also distributes food to federal military bases, prisons and veterans hospitals.

Nationwide, the program delivers \$50 million worth of produce to schools. The delivery trucks arrive at Vermont schools once a month.

Welch said H.R. 5812 would help demonstrate to states the viability of bringing locally sourced fruits and vegetables to the table, while supporting local economies.

Fifth-graders at the news conference pointed out that shorter rides in trucks also would reduce those meals' carbon footprints.

"The kids brought this up, and they're dead right," Welch said.

Their written remarks, submitted to the congressman Monday morning, will be added formally to the Congressional Record, he said.

The bill is under consideration by the House Committee on Education and Labor. As written, three states could participate in the pilot program.

Vermont stands a good chance of making the final cut, Welch said, because of its already-robust farm-to-school networks.

Beyond the cafeteria, many schools' curricula cross-pollinate themes of local agriculture and personal and environmental health, Vermont Secretary of Agriculture Roger Allbee said.

"The bill makes sense on a lot of levels," he said. "We know that produce trucked long distances is not terribly fresh; we know that students are educating their parents about nutrition; and we know a lot of people have concerns about food safety."

An additional \$90,000 to spend locally will not shift Vermont's food policies appreciably, but it could help lend momentum to existing programs here and around the country, he said.

"When we show other states how it works, we can show them how it can be expanded," Allbee said.

Welch's Republican opponent in the November election, Paul Beaudry of Swanton, said Monday afternoon that he was unfamiliar with the bill — and (coupled with a pressing engagement in Lyndonville) couldn't respond in detail to its introduction.

"On the face of it," he said, "it sounds like a good idea."

The Vermont Farms-to-School Act of 2006 formalizes the state's commitment to local produce.

Yet substantial obstacles remain in the way of making the switch from commodity to Vermont-grown, said Abbie Nelson, co-director at Vermont FEED (Farm Education Every Day), a project comprised of three Vermont nonprofits: Food Works at Two Rivers Center, Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont and Shelburne Farms.

The Department of Defense produce shipments make up 14 percent to 20 percent of Vermont's school budgets, she said; other federal aid helps schools pay for frozen food (much of it protein) and canned and dry goods. Food directors must work with limited budgets, and surplus commodity food has been an attractive option, Nelson said.

But, she said, bulk shipments to remote states such as Vermont often result in fewer choices and less flexibility in menus; in the past decade, more than half of Vermont's 320 public schools have moved toward local options.

"These are environmental, political, educational as well as economic decisions," she said.

Adding flexibility to a national food program — even a small one — would be a victory, said Dana Hudson, the northeast regional lead for the National Farm to School Network and a food educator at Shelburne Farms.

"It starts to break down barriers that have been perceived as real barriers," she said. "This starts to demonstrate that we don't just have to work within the system, but we can change the system."